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# Not far from the tree

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# NOT FAR FROM THE TREE

A Creative Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

L. Carol Lappin

May 2007

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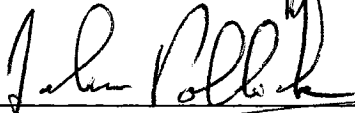
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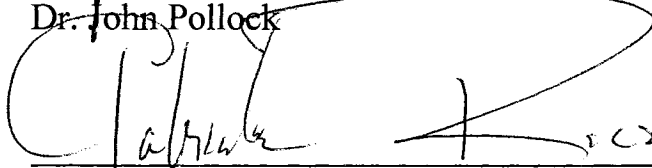
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## ABSTRACT

### NOT FAR FROM THE TREE

by Linda Lappin

This project, entitled *Not Far from the Tree*, is a collection of original poems written while I was an MFA student at San Jose State University. Most of the poems are internal monologues; some speak directly to the reader, and some to another persona. In one way or the other, they are all autobiographical in that they reflect what I see through the lens of my experience and of people I have known.

Some poems, however, are imitative. These poems derive their structure from the other poems, but are in some way conveying an opposite meaning from that of the original, as is the case with both "Next Mourning" and "Wild Goose Chase."

There is a mix of free and formal verse in the project in part because some of these poems were assignments in form from Dr. Maio. In a few poems, however, a form came about organically from the meaning.

This project represents nearly six years of extensive study. These studies have been like a ground school preparing this poet for flight.

### *Acknowledgments*

My thanks to Lara Gualarte for publishing my poem “Living on the Volcano” in *Convergence*, and to Ishmael Reed for his thoughtful instruction as the Lurie Professor and for posting my poem “Next Mourning” on his website.

Many thanks to my fellow students, for taking time with my poems and giving such thoughtful advice. I want to especially acknowledge Kelly Harrison and Julie Saxton for offering their time and help in so many ways and Sherry Jackson for being herself.

While taking up the study of poets I found a need for the company of poets whenever I could. For this kind of connection Ellen Bass was instrumental. I also came into contact with some fine writers through Molly Fisk’s Poetry Boot Camp. Mary Wagner helped me get into my senses in the Somatic work we did in San Francisco and I thoroughly enjoyed Sally Ashton & Nils Petersen’s workshops through the San Jose Poetry Society. The weekend I spent with the editors of the *Sun* magazine, especially the interview with Sy Safransky, gave me an immense boost when I was surely slipping into habit.

Through a series of fortunate events, I met Rose Black and Raffi Del Bourgo. Together we formed the Stoneyard group, named for where we meet. These women have instilled in me an appreciation for the work of poetry and the courage to send my poems out once we have worked them. These women gave me the gift of flight.

I have a special place in my heart for Naomi Shihab Nye, who took the time to read my poems and give me thoughtful advice. She came to speak with a small group of us in what was once called the Montalvo Seminar (English 139).

Finally, sincere gratitude to my many instructors, especially Sam Maio for his encouragement in the area of form, for John Pollock and Alan Soldofsky for their patience with me during the MFA exam miseries, for Chris Fink for getting me started, for John Engell for taking a chance on me in the TA program—which made two of these six years possible—and most especially for the unbelievable dedication of Alan Soldofsky as MFA advisor, coach, and friend.

*for Bill Wilson and Bob Smith*  
Without whom I would not be trudging this road of happy destiny.



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## Preface

When Wordsworth exclaimed, “O welcome messenger! O welcome Friend!” he was “talking to” a pastoral scene. He considered the city his tormentor and nature the antidote. He had the sense that if he were under opens skies, near a lake, strolling along a path in the forest, he was home. In the city he was lost. From Book One of The Prelude:

O welcome messenger! O welcome Friend!  
A captive greets thee, coming from a house  
Of bondage, from yon City’s walls set free,  
A prison where he hath been long immured. (157)

The cadence, the exclamation marks, and the hyperbole—the speaker / poet is like a child bouncing through the threshold of a favorite friend’s home. He is not actually a slave in the coal mines, or a factory worker—but a reader may assume that the speaker sees the smoke and dislikes the market place that all of industrialized life had become. With the resources available to the speaker, he removes himself from the “torment” of the working world and freely asks:

What dwelling shall receive me? What Vale  
Shall be my harbour? Underneath what grove  
Shall I take up my home, and what sweet stream  
Shall with its murmurs lull me to my rest? (157)

His nature is embodied in groves and hedges, in manicured streams around tidy lakes. And it welcomes him. Nature is a place he might safely move into. Wordsworth’s iambic meter brings with it a sense of order while the gentle phrasing lulls the reader deeper into a peaceful trance. This is the requisite trance state in which a poet might compose himself—and his poems.

Initially, I felt the same way about the Santa Cruz mountains. They were my escape from the city below. I too felt that, in these woods, I might reflect in tranquility upon the vicissitudes of my life. The dream of hiking by a stream while capturing the verdant beauty all around me was powerful. But it seems that, instead of tranquility, I found in that dispassionate Darwinian world a perfect reflection of my harshest self.

Mark Strand, in his essay "Landscape and the Poetry of Self," proposes that Wordsworth came to the page (and nature) with a very different relationship with nature than the poets I'd been reading, the moderns. "Throughout *The Prelude* there is a presumption about Being that no contemporary poet, so far, has been able to make" (105). Strand contends that for Wordsworth, Being is an "adequate reflection of Nature." This reflection is circular—Man is a necessary equal to the power that inspires him—and the poet returns the favor by giving Nature a poetic life. So it is that love of nature emerged out of a love of self.

This love of self was as alien to me as it was for the poets I first loved. In *The Prelude*, however, the self exists because it brings itself into being. It absorbs nature into itself and is exalted in the process. Modern poets like Galway Kinnell will, on occasion, also merge their consciousness with nature, but I would not call the resulting state exalted. I am referring, of course, to "The Bear" and "The Porcupine" where the speaker and the creature are adversaries until the final dreamscape brings them together in all the visceral imagery that only Kinnell can call forth. These are powerful poems that better represent a modern understanding of man's place in nature. We seem to have passed through the pastoral and romantic phase through a dark hopeless time at the turn of the

twentieth century, to a time where man again looks to nature for answers. The answers are quite different from the welcoming vales in Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

I want to pause here to follow my lineage from Wordsworth through Thomas Hardy. While studying for an exam I discovered Hardy and it changed how I felt about my musty forebears. His hopeless outlook and vivid, dark imagery spoke to my deepest fears. Certainly with the destruction of the rain forest, global warming, thickening air, and perpetual war—many would find a kindred spirit in Hardy. For Thomas Hardy the pull of landscape as a symbol representing his tone (feelings) is balanced by his use of real imagery. In *The Darkling Thrush*, for instance, the imagery is both symbolic and realistic. Gone is the idealized and therefore vague pastoral scenery of the previous era.

Leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-gray,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day (137)

Hardy employs a chopped meter, “Leant / up / on a cop / pice gate” like boots across a frost-covered field. His Frost is a spectral vision and his winter is desolate and all under a feeble sun! One has no trouble assessing the speaker's mood. The language is direct, often abstract (desolate) and yet the images are crisp. For this speaker the cityscape is mirrored in nature. Where Wordsworth might escape to his welcoming vale, Hardy will lean wearily upon the garden gate. At the turn of the twentieth century it seems no one hoped for much good to come of the coming years. Men at the turn of the century had turned their eyes away from their gods, turning to science for all of their

answers and it gave them the industrial revolution. Without a deity to fall back on (having traded the god of war for a war on nature), men were set adrift.

The land's sharp features seem'd to be  
The Century's corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament. (137)

The speaker seems to be standing in the middle of T.S. Eliot's "Wasteland." How can a place like this inspire a poet to exaltation? Whence the passion recalled in tranquility? There is no passion but despair, no tranquility but in death. The speaker means to represent the collective dread of his age in this stanza: "And every spirit upon earth / Seem'd fervourless as I" (138). But Hardy, according to Susan Lorsch, is a man of both the romantic and modern sensibilities. In her essay "Nature as Fact and Nature as Symbol" she examines this tension in Hardy's novels. What she says about the novels, I think, is also true of his poetry. His landscape tension can be seen as one more expression of:

Hardy's late-nineteenth-century conflict between the romantic world of meaning for which he still yearns and the anti-romantic world of designification into which he finds himself thrust. Hardy's romantic impulse conflicts with his intellectual acknowledgement that nature is without inherent meaning, and further complicates his impulse to paint faithfully a detailed and accurate picture of nature. (78)

In the end, "The Darkling Thrush" extends faint hope in a feeble chirp. The line begins: "At once a voice among / The bleak twigs overhead" (137)—this is no burning bush and no booming voice of God—it is a peep in *bleak twigs*. This is not even the hopeful chirp of a fledgling, but a bedraggled aged thrush in "blast-ruffled plume."

It is as if the poet felt a need to balance the tone by ending on a less dismal note—without relinquishing the mood of the speaker:

That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was not aware. (138)

At the same time, on a different continent, Rainer Maria Rilke published The Book of Hours: The Book of Monastic Life that began with the poem “Ich Lebe grad, da das Jahrhundert geht.” In this poem the speaker says, “I’m living just as the century ends” (BH 54) and Rilke compares this time to a great leaf “that God and you and I / have covered with writing”(54). This century, this great leaf is out of their hands! With Rilke, there is much sympathy for his deposed God.

A great leaf, that God and you and I  
have covered with writing  
turns now, overhead, in strange hands.  
We feel the sweep of it like a wind.

I find Rilke’s unabashed romanticism in The Book of Monastic Life as refreshing as his release of that urge in The Sonnets to Orpheus. Recently, I’ve been studying Rilke in a monthly seminar where we make an in depth study of both his work and his influences. I read him in translation by C.F. Mac Intyre, Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, and Stephen Mitchell, wishing that I had learned German. Yet, there I am in very good company, because so many of my favorite poets have either translated and / or written essays about Rilke. Because I read his work in translation, a study of his rhyme and meter would be impossible. That isn’t what thrills me about Rilke anyway. In every

essay I read about Rilke from Robert Hass, Galway Kinnell, Denise Levertov and others, I find that we all appreciate Rilke for his ability to find transcendent meaning through poetry. Rilke expressed, in his poetry, his anguish in the absence of a faith in God, a faith he needed to cope with death, war and disease. We, Hass, Kinnell, Levertov, and myself, follow his search for a new mythology, a mechanism to bring us some solace during moments of despondency. Rilke finds that solace in place (Russia) and in the Orpheus myth.

The last two couplets of “Ich Lebe grad, da das Jahrhundert geht” tell us that the speaker is looking forward to the unknown—a place that hasn’t disappointed him yet: “We see the brightness of a new page / where everything can happen,” and yet this strange hand that brings in the new century is no more communicative than the God Rilke often holds one way commerce with: “Unmoved by us, the fates take its measure / and look at one another, saying nothing” (54).

However, it was during Rilke’s tour of Russia with his lover/mentor Lou Andreas-Salome, that he found a landscape, which, according to Robert Hass, “corresponded to the size and terror and hushed stillness of his own inner life” (234). Hass’s essay “Looking for Rilke”, describes Rilke’s self discovery beginning with the first half of the “Duino Elegies” through the “Sonnets to Orpheus” and the last half of the “Duino Elegies”—a little over a decade of writing. I felt little affinity for Rilke’s angels (Book of Hours), but am totally transfixed by the Orpheus persona. Hass examines the very lines of the “Second Elegy” that first captured my attention long ago:

But we, when moved by deep feeling, evaporate; we



Breathe ourselves out and away; from moment to moment  
Our emotion grows fainter, like perfume. (Hass 229)

Recently, I wrote a poem about a photo album returned after thirty years in which I tried to convey just that sentiment, that we cannot contain the beauty—not of jasmine or of love left behind. Rilke puts it like this: “And those who are beautiful, oh who can retain them? Appearance ceaselessly rises / in their face, and is gone. Like dew from the morning grass, / what is ours floats into the air”(229), and then Rilke compares our lives to receding waves, space, and taste. These are all the landscapes of longing I long to capture in my poems.

Where Hardy curls up in a hardening shell, Rilke opens himself up to the terror in the hope of finding some kind of solace. “The Duino Elegies are an argument against our lived, ordinary lives” says Hass. “Rilke’s gift is that he is always calling us away” from the trivialities of our lives. The gathering, the apparent richness of the self is nothing Rilke can live for. He needs the “raw, objectless longing”(231).

In his earlier work, it was Rilke’s interest in Nietzsche, especially Zurathustra, that defined his purpose as “the task of art: God-making”(233). He seemed to say that the hollowed out place in the modern poet was created by the death of his God. He needed to recreate himself in a new image. He continued to cut away at himself, to deepen his language and his understanding.

It is this deepening of experience is what I want from poetry. Hass says this deepening “is what people mean by poetry” (230). A case in point is the Sonnets to Orpheus that grew out of Rilke’s extreme distress at the death of a very young girl. He

couldn't escape his depression. In order to reconcile himself, at last, with the indelible truth of it—he had to “find a way to transform the emptiness, the radical deficiency, of human longing into something else”(233). Then, in the “First Sonnet”—Orpheus replaces the angel of Rilke's *Book of Hours*: “A tree ascended there. Oh pure transcendence! / Oh Orpheus sings. Oh tall tree in the ear” (260)!

How like Wordsworth Rilke's speaker sounds here! How ecstatic! Rilke found, in the Orpheus myth, a narrative that translated his losses into the immortal seasons. In Rilke's interpretation of the myth, Persephone wants to stay in Hades, but Orpheus wants her back. Orpheus's struggle with death is a metaphor for Rilke's struggle with the angel. The gods are happy in Hades, peace not possible in the murderous world above ground. Like Rilke, Orpheus comes to accept the seasons of man.

The following is a translation by C.F. Mac Intyre some lines of “Sonnet 29”:  
“Still friend of many distances, feel yet / How your breathing is augmenting space.” And ending with “Though / earth itself forgot your very name, / say unto the tranquil earth: I flow. / To the fleeting water speak: I am” (113). An amazing confirmation of a poet's place in the cycle of trends, time, and culture.

The poet I most admire found in Rilke a comforting and demanding muse. In her essay “Rilke as Mentor,” Denise Levertov says that the first Rilke she read was the 50 Selected Poems translated by C.F. Mac Intyre given to her in 1942 by her father. Levertov acknowledges the faults of this translation but admires Mac Intyre's passion for her subject. She went on to read all of Rilke's works in translation but settled on a book of prose, Letters to a Young Poet, as a guide for her literary life and it is through

Levertov that I came to Rilke around 1975. I was given a copy of *her* poems Life in the Forest and I wanted to know more about this Denise Levertov. In the Foothill College library I found a copy of New and Selected Essays.

In Levertov I discovered a brave voice in time of war, a gentle counsel in times of inner conflict. She approached nature, especially in her last collection, The Great Unknowing, the way I aspire to—with awe, seeking entrance. Her last poem is a perfect example of what I mean by reverence for nature:

AWARE

When I opened the door  
I found the vine leaves  
speaking among themselves in abundant  
whispers.

My presence made them  
hush their green breath,  
embarrassed, the way  
humans stand up, buttoning their jackets,  
acting as if they were leaving anyway, as if  
the conversation had ended  
just before you arrived.

I liked  
the glimpse I had, though,  
of their obscure  
gestures. I liked the sound  
of such private voices. Next time  
I'll move like cautious sunlight, open  
the door by fractions, eavesdrop  
peacefully. (Unknowing 62)

It is imperative that a reader be AWARE of the way poetry gives life back to nature. Look at those wonderful line breaks: “My presence *made them*” yes it did! “I’ll

move like cautious sunlight, *open*” and the poem opens with the sunlight. What a whisper soft praise of nature, what meditative exaltation at last.

Whether or not we know it, when we pick up a pen, we are entering a stream that goes back to the caves of our ancestors. Our first instincts of survival were linked with imagery. When we lost our gods, we found words and images to fill that void. Some of my poems echo the haunted despair of Thomas Hardy (“Living on the Volcano”), some the momentary exaltation of Wordsworth (“The Little Saxton Hat), they all reach for the poetic release found in Rilke (“One World”), and some there are that speak directly to Levertov (“Packing Levertov”).

One last note from Robert Hass where he quotes from a letter Rilke wrote late in life about the way Rilke’s early and later work would be interpreted in the years to come: “What I write as an artist will probably be marked, to the end, by traces of that opposition by means of which I set myself on my own course. And yet if you asked me, I would not want this to be what emanated above all from my works” (267).

I would like to add, along those lines, that many of the poems in this collection grew out of my MFA program, as well as out of a long standing disillusionment with relationships and my culture. So I, like Rilke, hope that these first missives are not what—*emanate above all from my works*. I hope these poems find their home within the poems of place, as they express both my human and animal nature through the imagery.

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**I**  
**The Nature of Work and Cities**

## Son of Sisyphus

The alarm  
Launched the cat  
Set the parrot aflutter.

He started the coffee, jump-starting  
Those sputtering synapses  
He fed the cat

Flushed the toilet, dropped his robe.  
Slipped under the shower he'd set to searing  
He rose with the steam to his rightful place  
King of an antediluvian paradise  
A patchouli-scented river streaming over his regal backside  
Wending its way to a clear  
kelpless sea.

Outside  
The tangerine sun burned off the early fog  
On this Montara morning, and  
Traffic thickened  
Up highway 92.

## Monday Morning

The fog retreats from all but the tops  
of the redwood, Douglas Fir, ragged oak. . .

grey furry fingers and black nails stretch out  
from beneath the wooden steps--  
a woolly bandit pulls the cat dish under the porch.

A coyote so still only his red fur rustles  
from the motoring wind blowing by  
his ears back to monitor a shadow  
across the road—a pale fawn darting  
from deep woods across Big Basin Way

The mailman in dreadlocks trails patchouli  
and squints into the cool mountain mist  
with mail bundled for Jonnie's Market

A Harley rider pulls into the parking lot  
a saffron suited monk clinging  
to his leathered back When they stop  
The Venerable Renée throws a leg over  
the seat and pauses, palms pressed, bows thanks  
Harley man nods and wheels away  
down Highway 9

Dalia, Pall Mall dangling from the grey line of her lips  
sweeps butts off the wooden sidewalk outside Joe's Bar



then stomps hers into the street—  
and disappears through the swinging doors--  
engulfed in smoke and dust

And commuters, holstering cell phones careen past  
a coyote chasing a fawn across the road,  
past Big Basin, and the White Cockade;  
descending twenty-nine miles down Highway 9  
into Silicon Valley

## Living on the Volcano

*For Naomi Nye, with gratitude*

When our fathers built the Golden Gate  
with hundreds of other steel headed men  
full of heroics, tans, and calluses —  
they owned their lives and their work.

Now I return from my cube  
by way of roads clogged with cubed  
selves like me,  
listening to stock reports, helpless against the unknowns.

We are clutching our pink slips, walking  
back-straight down narrow halls like  
virgins to the mouth of our mountain--  
while our families tend the slopes  
in restaurants and gas stations.

In paneled offices, on leather chairs  
overlooking empty parking lots,  
they focus on the bottom line.

And my second-hand car cost  
more than my parents spent  
on their first home  
and it is smaller, like my cube  
like my life.

## The Toothhenge

Drying plywood patches cover  
The empty eyes of the almost perfectly preserved  
Victorian on Seventh Street

One block slated for city hall  
Leaving behind upturned cement slabs  
Like the old woman sitting on the stoop  
Shaded by the avocado tree pushing up through the porch boards  
She drinks beer in a bag  
And looks up as I pass

Neither tree nor woman with the Stonehenge smile  
Pay any heed to the sign over the door:  
Historical Moving Company

## Sestina in Silicon

Here in the aspiring city of San Jose,  
Where there are twenty-seven words for "fired,"  
Not all of them polite, the wayward mind  
Will wish for better plans of its own making,  
Some lifelong, secure, or well-paid island  
Alive with donut carts and burnished desks,

And O that we were there. But here the desks  
Of this beige, sun-burnt city of San Jose  
Have sown whole mines of silicon about their land  
(Bare ruined garden that it is) and then RIF'd  
Comes down: cruel judgment in the making.  
Yet on that wafer that now acts like mind,

A Google Engine turned up rhymes for *mind*:  
and poems fight for pixel rights, on desk  
Tops strewn with icons—myth in the making.  
Boasts that would gladden the poor of San Jose  
With comforting to soothe the pain of Cut-backs.  
How faintly now we recall that island--

Was dreamed possible once, more than an island,  
The websites spun by nearly noble minds.  
In that kind climate the mere thought of fired  
Was but a joke we'd make at cluttered desks,  
Unable to conceive this other San Jose,  
Made plans, and were light hearted in the making.

Dream as we may, there is far more to making  
Do than some wistful reverie of an island,  
Especially now when hope dies with the San Jose  
municipality, which hasn't the mind  
to weather downturns while cubes and desks  
are emptied by the recently released.

Although we know we weren't let go, but fired,  
the single verity was Telcom's making,  
deeply indifferent to the demands of the desked  
and cubed-up workers dreaming of some island.  
Beneath our empty skies, what worried mind  
dares ask *how do I get out of San Jose?*

No island fantasy survives San Jose,  
where, at our desks we wait for "fired"  
that is neither in our interest nor of our making.

## **The Graveyard Shift**

Deep in the windowless belly of building thirty-two  
Far from street noises – she poises a light pen  
Over the blue grid, connecting dots ten hours a night

Until one late night, after the guard  
made his chummy rounds—she stalks the cubes  
with a felt-tipped pen and notes her birthday  
in everyone's day-timer, desk calendar, and rolodex.

Her nocturnal mischief taught her,  
by the time her victims found her August  
birthday, both she and her supervisor would be long gone.

## Next Mourning

For Randall

Strolling from Ram to Regal, from Regal to Ranger  
I kick a tire. Man . . . I'd like a Hummer.  
All that square-jawed, slick-suited or ball-capped  
Hunting and bragging herd, are selves I can ignore.

Yet somehow, I stroll through all these lots,  
the saleswoman steers me to the Windstar!  
Can't she see who I am? If only she knew me then.  
I was young and poor, I craved  
what all men crave: a bigger dick. . .

Now that I'm old, my needs are pitiful:  
I just want that saleswoman schmoozing that punk  
To want *me*. I can't believe-- she ignores me.

Was a time, I couldn't keep my wick dry.  
The chicks dug me daily and begged for more.  
Ah but I bit the bullet, settled  
--like dust

I can't believe it--Now that damn sales chick is trying  
to sell me a Volvo! and she pats my wife's dog.  
Forget it. *Cuddles and I are going home.*

My last bit of wildness a vapor in my long forgotten past  
(NOT by my wife with the memory of a friggen elephant)  
But—today I miss my boy away at school  
And I wish I had *my own* dog. Maybe a bull Mastiff!

I look at my life and am afraid  
it will get worse, my stocks will plummet,  
my social security already spent.

Pretty young things calling me Sir  
and I awake to my father's face in the mirror  
but with a look I never saw.

It was at Harold's funeral last night  
His stucco face in blank acceptance  
All that Rogaine wasted on a dead man . . . I knew  
It could have been me.

I beat him at cards last week, I was at the top of my game!  
And now I think. . . when I die  
I'll go with cremation  
I'll be the big brass urn on the damn nightstand



## **II**

### **The Nature of Nature**

## Extinction

The owl's head rotating  
    On a lamppost  
Blinking back our featherless world

Ghosts hold deathwatch  
    Over the long-toed salamander,  
The Sequoia,  
    And the burrowing owl.

Behind mahogany desks  
    The magi make moonscapes  
Of the dawn-smelling world

Like the tribes before us  
    We have fallen prey  
To grasping gods

## Heartless Beauty

I see the shadow first—a falcon circling  
over Lexington Dam  
a Peregrine, wings tucked  
in a hunting descent.

This soaring single-mindedness  
inspires heart-thumping wonder.  
Baby ducks paddling away  
from the screech, blunder into her claws.

I put the binoculars down, no stomach  
for the downy death  
scene in progress

When I look up I see the Peregrine preening in the highest bough  
above a rippling calm.

## **One World**

The following five poems are a series about living in the deep woods

### **I. Ruby Throated Hummingbirds**

I dangled a hummingbird feeder just outside the kitchen window—  
from a low hanging branch and marveled as she hovered  
like a gilded ornament from the empty sky.

I found her ragged thimble of a body broken across the kitchen floor.

And on the steps my yellow-eyed cat preened.  
Eat. . . this is her body.

### **II. Four Roosters**

From banisters they muttered their officious observations.  
In the clearing they chased each other,  
two made a black and white Chinese print on the sepia setting,  
and the other two, resplendent in reds and golds, like blustering  
Van Gogh's, crowing all day and half the night.

The first night they woke me squawking from the windowsill  
I rushed to find coyotes circling the cabin, feathers tossed  
like a pillow fight—no sign of the black and white  
I lead the two golden survivors into the kitchen.

Three nights later a rowdy pack of raccoons broke into the kitchen,  
dragged the cat food onto the porch.  
The roosters were stone quiet and the white cat watched  
from the top of the refrigerator.  
The next night one more bird went missing.

On the last night, a raccoon came rolling in  
for the last, the brightest fellow.  
I started from sleep, followed the feathers,  
cut my soles along the thistled path.  
Catching up with the fellow in thick Manzanita,  
I beaned him with a mag-light.  
Then gathered the frazzled bird under my arm

In the first light of morning he puffed up for his aria:  
Carpe doodle diem, again and again.  
That morning I found a place in town for him.  
They say he clucks quietly now, pecking  
about with an old dog in a fenced yard.

### III. The Skunk

One night I heard a rustle in the kitchen.  
Thinking the cat got into the 20 pound bag of kibbles,  
I climbed, attempting stealth,  
down from the loft and into the pantry  
to find—sure enough!  
A cat food bag roiling across the floor.  
Clapping my hands to startle the cat out of the bag,  
out sprang a skunk the size of my shoe.

He bolted to the nearest wall,  
dug frantically--trying to escape--  
when he suddenly turned scurried past me,  
ducking behind the water heater, his chest heaving.  
In all my years I have never been as terrified as he was.

#### IV. The Reptile Hunter

Only rarely did my yellow-eyed cat pursue a bird or mouse,  
he focused mostly on fall colored lizards, see-through newts,  
and the heart-stopping beauty of mountain rattlers.

That afternoon, an unearthly rattle woke me from a nap on the porch --  
I jumped down to see who had cornered a snake,  
my stepson or my cat; I came upon two stone-still primitives  
near the ravine—my cat and an eight-foot timber rattler.

The dusty snake coiled like a cobra, they were eye to eye.  
I used a redwood limb to fling the snake over the chasm,  
but the cat was frozen forever in that pose.  
Dead by the time I returned.

#### V. One World

I met a man in plaid.  
His golden hair and sleepy brown  
eyes melted my senses like chocolate.  
I took him home to my cabin.

He cut down my oldest trees, whose roots grew  
around the circle of one enormous trunk.  
He saw lumber where I saw a forest.  
Winter grows on my bones like mold. This is home—  
where the rare Peregrine streaks past on his way to the ducks  
I fed last summer; where the men in town thrive  
on the sounds of guns and chainsaws, and the women patch their jeans.

## She Left Us

For Twitters

One Saturday morning in June —

She exhaled

and cooled

like a star

This cat, so subtle, I forget she isn't here

I call her, the hallway answers in echoes.

Though I never translated a word of her prattle,

she made herself understood.

And made her way past me without a word

leaving behind

her breath

and bones

Beneath a peach tree she rests.

Like Gandhi,

like Genghis Khan

we leave and we stay.

## Remnants

Out of the ocean gently rocking  
a turtle surfaced, tilting skyward--  
an island, ridged and round.

I am counted old for a woman.  
In the turtle's face, there is no counting  
years. He is there, ancient, ageless.

So far from land that the grey sky  
and green ocean merged around us. I hung  
over port side, green as the sea.

until just that moment  
a hushed wake...

His shell like an overturned boat.

His deeply cracked face--wedge shaped,  
a stone masthead glided past.



## Monument Valley

Whose dog is this,  
this rugged wagging Border collie  
bounding across the gravel road  
sniffing out our warm fry bread?

This rugged wagging Border collie,  
appearing suddenly at our table,  
sniffing out our warm fry bread;  
we stroke his neck and he bows his head.

Appearing suddenly at our table--  
the hopeful face of no one's dog;  
we stroke his neck and he bows his head--  
and we see his neck is ringed in red.

The hopeful face of no one's dog  
Sits patiently; we pull back bloodied hands  
because his neck is ringed in red.  
We yelp, *his throat's been cut!*

We ask the fry-man if he will help!  
But he's scraping a living along a gravel road,  
So he looks past us and says, *It's not our dog.*  
We wash our hands and drive away,  
leaving before we know  
whose dog it was.

## Dust and Mud

Leaning into your plate you talked excitedly about ruts and pot holes  
About mud and wash boarding and drainage—a familiar monologue.  
I drifted off somewhere in the middle—drawn away by your gravy . . .  
the silting mashed potatoes couldn't hold the wrinkling mud of gravy

In the Santa Cruz mountains we have only two seasons: dust and mud.

Summer and fall the dust paints broad strokes up the mountains,  
choking trees and conversations.

We always want the rain.

We want the drama, the predicable disasters,  
and the shoe-sucking swamp of winter.

You talk to fill the dank emptiness of our days—no need to listen.

There was a time we hungered for each other

when my chest ached at the sight of anyone who looked like you.

The first rainfall doesn't change a thing. It sits on the dust in curled  
droplets like mercury. A breeze sighs; the dust settles again.

Out the window an old man helps his wife out of the car.

*They are silent.* I look forward to the silence, or a sudden scream.

The first storm slams the canyon walls, thick brown rivers  
Clogged with roots, boulders and abandoned wrecks  
Overflow the banks, pulling a wall of mud over us all.

## The Star Jasmine

reaches across a chasm and pours abundantly  
over the fence from an unseen root.  
the other vines tumble, reaching  
for damp earth on this side of the fence, and she notes one  
whisper-thin strand above  
the tree waving in the faint breeze;  
a hand-shaped blossom groping for clouds.

She inhales waves of Jasmine,  
almost missing the faded half moon,  
a face partially erased,  
in the summer sky.

Then faces more ghostly than the moon  
reach back for her from a box on the kitchen table;  
delivered this afternoon, a photo album returned after thirty years.

The scent of jasmine streaming deep into memory, until she,  
with the eyes like an astronaut  
glances back—through the portal,  
rice fields, water buffalo grazing, a place  
of war and poverty—the emerald orb of home.

## Stellar Jays

Dive, screeching, into the cat food bowl  
Startles the cook and chases the chickadees  
into the Madrone where they chit their disapproval

A saffron monk guides us in Bodhichita meditation  
striving for compassion for all sentient beings,  
But we shut the Gompa windows against the ruckus.  
mental emptiness wiped out by these plucky opportunists.

Unfortunate incarnation—Blue Jay  
beautiful bodies, bombastic bickering—fighting over dried cat food.  
as some ravenous fishes follow a vessel  
when they could find feasts in waving kelp.

I dozed off then. . . dreamt I was an egret sailing  
through iridescent canyons—and that I knew something  
that I don't know now.

### **III**

## **The Nature of These Women and Their Families**

## The Slide

Recess in the first grade centered around a gravel playground  
A skin-worn slide  
and a ribbon of yipping 2<sup>nd</sup> graders ascending  
then faltering at the top

Sonny said *jump*, instead of *go*  
And I did.

I never meant to leap. I knew  
I could never trust myself again.

## Sparky

My sister rode her broomstick horse  
From Taylor street, across Moorepark,  
through the school yard  
to her first grade class with Mr. Clark:  
where she hooked Sparky's reins  
over the closet door--  
brushing the dust of nineteen fifty-five  
from her plastic chaps  
before taking her seat  
next to little lacy Deidre Greenbaum,  
her best friend.

## *Turtles, She Said*

Can live for two hundred years  
Sprinkled turtle flakes  
Float on the milky pond  
In a plastic paradise  
With a plastic palm  
Ten inches all round

*Wouldn't you just love  
To live two hundred years!*  
"But they move so slow"  
says the fidgeting first-grader

*Two hundred years, Dallas.  
That's more than twice as long  
As you will live.*

## Dallas Alice

*for my sister*

395 Nevada and California,

her favorite route

Sparks, Carson, Mono Lake, Topaz, San Bernadino:

barreling past truck scales on back roads

in the Kenworth: her life savings.

Sparks--eyes pinned and peering

through tinted glasses the incandescent

desert, rippling illusion--

Carson City to Lee Vining at full throttle

Mono Lake--gas pump transfusion

and she's pulling hard on a silver flask

past the station,

from the truck stop, vinyl, duct tape décor,

to the bar next door—Last chance Saloon

San Bernadino--weed tip glowing

in the naugahyde capsule—

she's an insomniac

at the side of the road

San Francisco General,

after 18 years of weed, whites and wine

she's come to a dead stop

a toe tag --no name



## Flying Lesson

Imagine a nine month old, baby-food smeared  
across her consternated face, inch-long Fingers  
fumbling for purchase of the unwieldy fork, when  
Abruptly the dinging lesson ends

And the flying lesson begins. Smacked backward  
She sails beneath plaster ceiling tiles, eyes wide like wings  
A nervous stomach at the dinner table.  
The only lingering memory of flight

## The Second Flying Lesson

Row upon row of slanting shingles  
Upon rows of identical roofs  
*Little Boxes on the Hillside*

Nigel mounts the fence from a wheelbarrow  
Tongue between his teeth, then up to the roof

Brigham, tall enough already to cast  
a Ked over the fence brace and pull himself up  
like a storm trooper, he joins Nigel on the roof.

Their arms out like flying-Christ's they leap  
from the roof one by one,

rubber souls sinking into new laid lawn

Dawn hesitates, toes jam into her penny-loafers  
She begins to slide on the crackling shingles until  
All the buck-toothed chorus cry out JUMP  
She comes to herself in a ball  
    Front tooth loose  
        And head aching.

### **Hang Gliding on Mission Ridge**

Milpitas looks like Ireland from this height  
Streets wider, perhaps, and more of them  
  
Gulls sail beside her. In the distance, sirens wail  
a tune Bartok might have penned  
and hikers wave from the trail below,  
but she misjudges how fast  
    the earth rushes up to greet the featherless.

## Flight Aborted

While her sisters pulled pillows over  
their mussed heads,  
She slipped into the bathtub  
and slit her wrist.

Her father ripped the bathroom door from its hinges  
her sisters pounding on his back  
like a pack of squirrels on a brown bear--  
    she drifted into a slippery  
fog where sirens reached for her  
from wave washed rocks singing  
songs of freedom

## Not Far from the Tree

She left a note, the words leaning into each other half off the page--  
On the back of a prescription slip  
and called a friend,  
her smoky vodka voice a blurred on the machine.  
Then she took everything she had.  
Leaving a scramble of empty bottles beside her bed.

And here,  
Swimming in my DNA, are the other messages she left.  
I want nothing of what she was.

What I wouldn't give for her diary, anything to direct  
me out of her orbit away from her hopeless  
fight with the white noise of suburbia.

Was a time  
I thought I *had* taken a different route  
I cut myself out of motherhood  
whacked out an entirely different life, alone.  
But still, it got me here,  
not a mile from that house or a minute  
from her maddened state.

## The Stored Life

Leaning back against the wheel she watches  
his feet under the truck  
like a bookmark.

He calls for a wrench  
she asks *which one?*  
He jerks the toolbox under the truck.

Meanwhile  
a trickle of oil wends its way--  
past the project spread out across the yard,  
past the garden, drying in the summer heat--

toward her books packed away  
in boxes made inaccessible  
by Autolite and Tilden's

## Long After Midnight

A petulant wind, a force without fingers or fists,  
grabbed the wrought iron gate,  
    yanked out its latch  
then slammed into the peeling rail  
clanging again and again,  
like a lover leaving twice.

Once, in a fury through the front door  
    then relived in dreams, the echo  
pounding an unrepentant heart,  
ripped open and slammed.

And the chambers of that heart,  
clanging in cavernous refrain,  
without meaning to,  
again and again.

.

## The Mistress of Monologue

He meows. She responds, *You said that last time*, and he again says, *Mrowell--* to which she says, *So what?*

It's the same conversation morning to night,  
no worse than the empty banter  
she carried on with Ned, her husband,  
for thirty odd years.

The day she woke to his cooling  
corpse she yelped and rolled away.

*You startled me!*

As always, Ned kept his counsel.

So she ventured to tell him her plans:

*I'm calling the police and your mother—  
then I'm hauling your treasures to the dumps.*

*Ah God*, she says, *Why didn't you take him before I got so old?*

And, like Ned, He says nothing.

## Cacoethes

No longer do I search the night for Mars  
in doleful thought, no dope, no schemes  
of keeping love, recouping loss, and dreams—  
or douse lost hopes with whiskey in dark bars.  
It would bespeak a fool, waiting for Santa Claus—  
I'd sooner join the tin man bound for Oz.

No make-up covers well: deep lines, light scars.  
Though comfort can be found in primal scream—  
your name. Where passion's vapor thins to steam:  
that finger through sweet forests—into stars.  
And vows bent low by time, break with laws.  
But, am I the willow that once I was?

Soft music for my ears: my eyes—Renoir.  
In gentle friendship love is what it seems.  
A sister's smile like breaking sunrise beams.  
Blue pens, good light: a poet's memoir.  
Most times I eat my salads—for good cause,  
but these days I would die for Haagen Daz.



## Freedom

Forget all the promises, pleas, and pardon-begging.  
Just tell him I love him. Remind him of the day  
he came to see me swim in the competition  
and hugged me, though I came in dead last.  
He is dying now. I can get over myself.

I'll get dad a glass of water,  
a magazine, and ask the nurse for a pen.  
In case he is asleep, I'll leave him a note.  
I enter room 708, nine at night and the room lights are too bright.  
Where are the machines? And his face!  
Frozen –  
eyes wide

When I come back to myself,  
I am forty-three  
holding a glass of water, a magazine, and  
no one left who knows me.

## The Immortal Dead

Just when the moon struck  
midnight, I slipped into bed.  
I thought I knew you, asleep  
beside me, face so smooth in lamplight:  
like a gravestone.

You, the strong builder of things,  
rolling up plans hammering out details.  
And when sleep brought me to you, curled  
in a comfortable C-flat,  
you whispered her name again.

Yours was the first name she knew,  
Before she took her first step,  
after she took her last.  
You hum in your sleep,  
The lullaby that we sang  
at her gravesite.

## Habeas Corpus

What was her crime in this life, that she relives every angry word,  
A missed embrace, but forgets years of musky passion  
and the morning sun slicing through fog?

She wanted more than motherhood, laundry, and this big house offered:  
only cool autumn sunshine, only love letters on blue paper, only love.

She cannot begin anew. Her hands, bent and stiff, cannot hold sable  
To the canvas-- cadmium, cerulean, sage--all drying in a shoebox.  
Her body, rigid as the dried stem of a rose, cannot lean into any new love.  
Her hair is winter white, her eyes milky pearls

She turns up the volume on Vivaldi until the speakers buzz.  
Her fingers pull across the pages of poetry she once loved.  
Faces around her contorted, enunciating, shouting  
even the things they would rather whisper.

She will retreat further and further  
from them and into herself until one day --  
she won't hear, or smell,  
the fire.

**IV**  
**The Wicked Nature of Writing**

## The Wild Goose Chase

*For Mary Oliver*

You really do have to be good.

You will spend a hundred nights in lamentation:

*If only Safransky would love what I write.*

Tell me about failure, yours—and I'll tell you mine.

Meanwhile the Sun goes down.

Meanwhile the moon and the illusive clouds

float over the man-scapes;

over the suburbs and the deep towers,

the highways and walled rivers of canals.

Meanwhile a barn owl waits high on a telephone pole

for the hapless rodent heading home.

Whoever you are, the critics deride your creations;

taunt you like the owl, cool and unnerving--

asking again and again,

*just who do you think you are?*

## **The Molly Maid's Lament**

My muse is, out of boredom, sleeping  
And these unborn poems lie dormant  
While this house is in want of keeping

A thousand days of compulsive sweeping  
Dries up young rhymes once so abundant  
And the muse, out of boredom, is sleeping

Digging through laundry baskets heaping  
In search of strong antidepressants  
Because the house calls for more keeping

The alarm, like a frantic bird, is beeping  
Who's snoring through it? My love, most repellant.  
But my muse, out of boredom, is still sleeping

My eyes are dimming: knees are creaking  
Can't see the paper, can't find the supplement  
Damn, the house wants serious keeping

How do poets keep from weeping?  
And shake their poems out like a dust-mat  
When their muse, out of boredom, is sleeping  
And the house is in want of keeping?

## Trading Places

My students prose is nothing like John Donne's  
Some monkeys have read more than they have read;  
If E.B. White is snow, their course works are dun.  
If hairs be wires, puce wires grow out those heads.

I've seen plain tracts bask'd in profound insight,  
But no such pith spews forth from twixt their sheets.  
And in some sweet tunes there is more delight  
Than what from out their headphones pounds and shrieks.

I yearn to hear them speak, yet well I know  
That Christ may show before I hear the sound,  
"This poem has caused deep thoughts in me to flow."  
Such madness may my boat run far aground.

And yet, by gawd, I hold their thoughts as rare  
As mine, when I first tasted of this fare.

## After Grading Papers All Night

I dreamed I saw St. Christopher  
Low-riding his classic Lincoln  
through the lavender desert  
Top *down*,  
Toga luffing like a mainsail  
and fat Elvis on the dash—  
his blue-black head bobbing  
to the tire-slapping beat  
of route six

six

six.



## **The Little Saxton Hat**

*For Julie*

Here's to hoping he wears his tiny fishing hat  
and safari outfit around his world and farther  
stopping in his mid-twenties long enough to love

And then off to Katmandu or Morocco  
Home for Christmas dinner,  
bringing teak and tile wonders to his close  
(and he has many) friends.

He will have a lover who loves what he loves, they'll lounge  
by the light of a warm fire, on the rare occasions that they are home  
Until they come to settle down near the folks  
who'll baby-sit the next little man in the Saxton line.

All starting with a stumble across the kitchen floor

In his Pooh Bear safari ensemble.

May the gods give him all the life I would have wanted for myself

If I'd have had that hat.

## The Stepson Chronicles

Beware

The eyes that watch

The mitts that catch.

*Cleanup that room*

*Before you mutate into*

*Whatever the hell*

*That is, under your bed.*

She says

*Too late, he says.*

## Packing Levertov

Rubbing his nose against Levertov's  
Blue Binding, purring.

It looks like affection,  
this itch or hunger.

Nuzzling the pages, blocking  
my view.

Where I am going  
Levertov can go, but not the cat.

Midnight before anesthesia.  
Nuzzling his smooth neck, rough  
Beard. Fear or affection?.

Where I am going, Levertov can go  
But not the lover.

I cannot help that life goes by  
Without seemliness, sometimes without love  
But I can take poetry.

Where I am going, Levertov will be.

## The Egg in 1A

I recognized him, my pupil  
pouring over Stanley Kunitz  
eyes blinking like a baby bird's.

Embryonic — not yet knowing

He counts syllables, marks scansion  
Sees movement perhaps, but not moment.  
He absorbs the scene  
but not the meaning — not yet, not now

He's lost a dog to the sea and  
his favorite gloves — it's all the same.

One day, tilting into his life  
until he has nothing left to give  
he will crack  
or dissolve in war or work. . .

and turn his unreflected life to a moment  
that may lead him back  
to that poem.

## Dear Muse, I Am . . .

a skin-encapsulated ego, alone.

Hand me a sky blue pen, thin paper—

Be *muse*, be skinless once, and open now  
this muddled art.

Before it shuts me out—

Hatch me now,

I'll do my part and with your art

Camenea, call me

when you're in town. Calliope,

save me from hyperbole!!!

Let winged sirens sing to me. I'd love  
to stay a *life* in song, staggering  
among the bones, not wasting away—

A virgin death: no elegy.

I know your sting: the silent pen,  
the empty page. I am without a ship or song,  
an ego wrapped in aging skin.

Come now.